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# Soviet navy completing four tunnels to hide subs

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The Soviet Union is believed to be "within months" of completing construction of four giant underwater tunnels in which to conceal and launch its strategic nuclear missile-carrying submarines, The Washington Times has learned.

According to sources familiar with the development, the tunnel project has the potential of making the Soviet nuclear submarine fleet "virtually invulnerable." This is because Soviet submarines could be fitted with nuclear missiles and deployed without detection. The tunnels also could afford the fleet greater protection against counter-attack in times of military conflict.

The sources, who requested anonymity, said existence of the Soviet submarine tunnels has been known for some time but has not been made public. Knowledge of the project is tightly compartmentalized and carries a top-secret code-word classification, the sources said.

The tunnels have been under construction in various parts of the Soviet Union for approximately 10 years, the sources said. One of the tunnels is said to be operational and the other three are very near completion.

One source added that completion of three tunnels appeared to be timed with the final construction of three giant "Typhoon"-class submarines, which could be housed in and launched from the shelters.

The tunnels are actually underground but are entered through an underwater opening. Inside, the tunnels are said to be similar to large dry docks, where submarines and other vessels are constructed and serviced.

While exact dimensions could not be obtained, the tunnels were described as being "massive," capable of allowing giant nuclear submarines to turn around, passing alongside other submarines being serviced.

The exact locations of the four tunnels were not revealed.

However, a likely location is the large Soviet naval base at Severomorsk or Sayda Guba, which is located near the city of Murmansk, just slightly east of Sweden and Norway.

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It is from this northern naval headquarters at Severomorsk that part of the Soviet fleet is directed against Western Europe.

Of major concern, the sources said, is that the tunnels would allow the Soviets to protect their strategic submarine fleet from counter-attack in wartime. The Soviets have approximately 70 ballistic-missile nuclear submarines (SSBNs). During wartime, about half of these SSBNs are expected to be deployed. The tunnels could shield the rest.

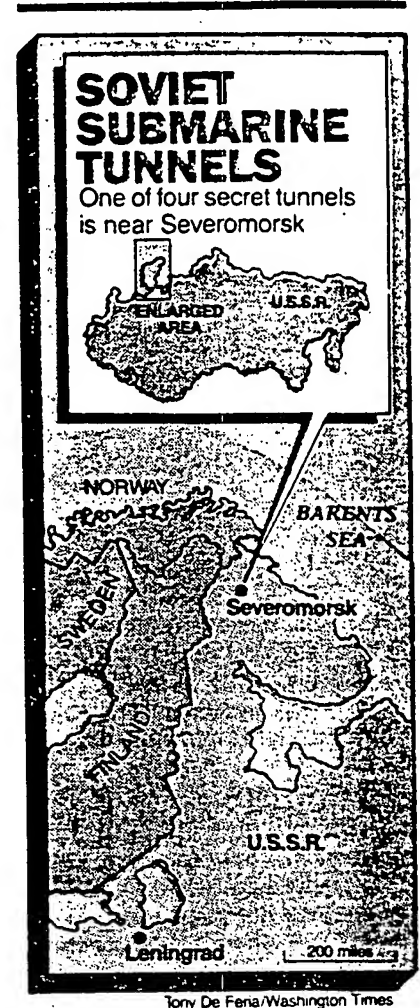
Of equal if not greater importance, the sources said, is that the tunnels would allow the Soviets to install intercontinental ballistic missiles aboard the submarines and to launch these subs without observation.

At present, the Soviet Union and the United States both use dry dock facilities that may be covered to construct and launch submarines and other vessels. At the time of launching, the vessels are easily detected by satellite or other means. The United States, for example, operates large naval facilities at Groton, Conn., and elsewhere, which are believed to be under surveillance by the Soviets and other foreign powers.

Another concern is that the Soviets could place ICBMs in canisters on nuclear-powered attack subs. In time of high alert, these subs could exit the tunnels, jettison the canisters and proceed on their regular missions. The ICBMs, meanwhile, could be launched from the jettisoned canisters.

This, in effect, could allow the Soviets to increase secretly the number of SLBM launchers available to them and could constitute a violation of the unratified SALT II treaty. Additionally, the mere ability to fit missiles onto submarines without detection might impede U.S. ability to monitor Soviet compliance with SALT, the sources said.

The Soviet Union has been engaged in a rapid submarine-building program since the early 1970s, according to Pentagon officials. It is known to have more than 200 nuclear-powered submarines in its fleet, including 49 guided missile submarines (SSGNS), 58 nuclear-powered attack subs (SSNs) and the 70 SSBNs.



There are at least three and possibly four "Typhoon" class SSBNs in the Soviet fleet. The Typhoon is the largest submarine ever built, measuring some two football fields in length. It is fitted with 20 SS-N-20 submarine-launched ballistic missiles, each equipped with six to nine independent nuclear warheads (MIRVs) capable of reaching U.S. cities from Soviet ports.

In addition, at least 14 "Delta 2" class submarines have been deployed, each carrying SS-N-18 submarine-launched ballistic missiles with three or seven warheads. The SS-N-18 can likewise hit U.S. targets from Soviet waters.